

CHAPTER NINE

THE RECEPTION OF BOOK B (*BETA*) OF ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS* IN THE *ILĀHĪYĀT* OF AVICENNA'S *KITĀB AŠ-ŠIFĀ'*

Amos Bertolacci

Already during his philosophical education, Avicenna conceives the practice of philosophy as an endeavor to solve theoretical problems. In the Autobiography, for example, when describing what has poignantly been called his “undergraduate education” in philosophy (which occupied him from the age of sixteen for one and a half years), Avicenna says the following:

Every time I was at a loss about a problem (*wa-lladī kuntu ataḥayyaru fīhi min al-masā'il*), concerning which I was unable to find the middle term in a syllogism, I would repair on its account to the mosque and worship, praying humbly to the All-Creator to disclose to me its obscurity and make its difficulty easy. At night I would return home, set the lamp before me and occupy myself with reading and writing. Whenever I felt drowsy or weakening, I would turn aside to drink a cup of wine to regain my strength and then I would go back to my reading. Whenever I fell asleep, I would see those very problems (*masā'il*) in my dream; and many problems (*masā'il*) became clear to me while asleep.¹

The details of this passage, such as Avicenna's recourse to prayers, wine-drinking and dreams, do not concern us here.² What is noteworthy is his peculiar attitude towards the problems (*masā'il*) he encountered during his philosophical studies, namely, his resolute will to find a solution to them. In this regard, his resort to all the procedures at his disposal, even non-philosophical ones, in order to find the “clarification” (*ittiḍāḥ*)—i.e., the explanation in syllogistic form—

¹ Avicenna, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā* (1974), 28.3–30.3. English translation as in Dimitri Gutas (1988), 27–28. The expression “undergraduate education” is taken from the detailed account of Avicenna's autobiography in Gutas (1988), 149–198.

² See Gutas (1988), 181–187.

of the still unsolved problems is significant. Already at this early stage, solving puzzles appears to be an essential and inescapable element of Avicenna's way of doing philosophy.

Avicenna's approach to philosophical difficulties remains similar to the one emerging from the Autobiography also later on in his life, when he passes from the position of student to that of teacher of philosophy. The collection of texts known as the *Mubāḥaṭāt* (*Discussions*) contains three letters by Avicenna to the disciple Bahmanyār. In one of these, written probably in 1030 (seven years before his death), Avicenna states:

As for the questions (*masā'il*) which you asked me, they are significant questions (*masā'il*) about the philosophical sciences and especially these particular ones. But treating such [questions] briefly leads to error, while too many of them overtax a mind preoccupied with cares, and it can hardly concentrate in the areas requiring explanation, especially for somebody who is like me and in my situation. I have studied [these questions] carefully and I have found them to be the proper ones; some I have answered at sufficient length, other by means of pointers, and still other perhaps I have been unable to answer at all. . . . You should engage in more such discussions [with me] on anything you wish, because in them lies pleasure and benefit. Whatever I am able to bring to light I will do so either openly, or from behind a veil which will act as a useful kind of stimulus and drill for it [i.e. the question at hand]; whatever I am unable to do so, I will excuse myself and admit it, since what is known to mankind is limited.³

The continuity between the two texts is striking. In the Autobiography, an exceptionally precocious self-taught Avicenna has to pray humbly in the mosque during the day and to do intensive research in his house at night in order to receive in a dream, while sleeping on his books, directly from the Agent Intellect, the syllogistic elucidation of many of the problems he is unable to solve. In the letter to Bahmanyār, on the other hand, an experienced Avicenna encourages the disciple to submit to him his "questions" (*masā'il*), so that the teacher, more aware now of the limits of human reason than he was during his youth, can express an authoritative "answer" (*ḡawāb*) on some of

³ Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Mubāḥaṭāt* (1992), 50.11–51.4 (= §36); 53.13–54.2 (= §45); English translation as in Gutas (1988), 58–59 (slightly modified). Gutas translates this letter under the title "Letter to an Anonymous Disciple." This letter is classified as part MII of the *Mubāḥaṭāt*, studied, dated and related to the rest of the work by David C. Reisman (2002), 207–213, 231–233.

them after a careful study and to the extent of his ability. The same pattern of question and answer governs most of the material gathered in the *Mubāḥaṭāt*, which, in this perspective, can rightly be regarded as a “collection of philosophical questions and Avicenna’s written answers.”⁴

Regardless of whether they are problems (i.e., questions raised by the very nature of things), as in the Autobiography, or questions (i.e., problems posed by students), as in the letter to Bahmanyār, Avicenna’s attitude towards the philosophical *masā’il* remains the same throughout his life: he strives, as much as possible, to find a solution or an answer to them, or, in other words, to remove and eliminate them. The Socratic way of doing philosophy by raising doubts, with an “ironical” attitude and a “maieutic” purpose, is totally alien to Avicenna.

In this perspective, it is interesting to study Avicenna’s treatment of a particular class of philosophical problems or questions, namely, the *aporiai* of the Aristotelian *corpus*. Aristotle’s *aporiai* are a particularly challenging type of theoretical difficulties. For they are difficulties with no apparent and no immediate solution, resulting from the contrast between mutually exclusive and equally reliable arguments, or between the states of affairs expressed in these arguments. I chose Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as a test-case. One of the fourteen books of this work, book B (*Beta*), is specifically devoted to explaining the philosophical significance of, to collecting, and to discussing the *aporiai* concerning metaphysics. *Metaphysics* B, therefore, constitutes the focus of my attention. The Greek term ἀπορία, recurring fifteen times in B, is almost invariably rendered as, or by means of, the expression “ambiguous problem/question” (*Mas’ala ġāmiḍa*) in the only extant Arabic translation of this book of the *Metaphysics*, the one ascribed to Uṣṭāṭ (ninth c.).⁵

⁴ Gutas (1988), 143. It is remarkable that in the already mentioned letter to Bahmanyār (*Mubāḥaṭāt*, 49.7), Avicenna’s work *al-Ḥikma al-mašriqiya* (*Eastern Philosophy*) or *al-Mašriqiyyūn* (*The Easterners*) is referred to by means of the expression *al-masā’il al-mašriqiya* (*Eastern questions*); see Gutas (1988), 115–116.

⁵ Uṣṭāṭ’s translation of B (as of other books of the *Metaphysics*) is preserved in the lemmata of Averroes’ *Tafsīr* (the so-called Long Commentary) of the *Metaphysics*; see Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba’d al-Ṭabī’a* (1938–1948), 1:165–295. The only exceptions to the rendering of ἀπορία as *mas’ala ġāmiḍa* are 995a30 (*nukūlu l-fahmi*, 166.1) and 999b17 (*šanā’a*, 236.11); in the translation of ἀπορία at 1000a5 (246.14–15) the adjective *ġāmiḍa* is omitted. The expression *mas’ala ġāmiḍa* recurs frequently in the translation of the verbs ἀπορῆσαι, διαπορῆσαι and προαπορῆν throughout B.

I take Avicenna's metaphysical masterpiece, the *Ilāhīyāt* ([*Science of*] *Divine Things*) of *Kitāb aš-Šifā'* (*Book of the Cure*), as the fullest expression of his attitude towards the *masā'il gāmiḍa*, or *aporiai*, of B.⁶ In the Prologue to the *Šifā'*, Avicenna portrays the *Ilāhīyāt* as containing "the science related to [Aristotle's] *Metaphysics*."⁷ As a matter of fact, the *Ilāhīyāt* is a reworking of the *Metaphysics*, even though neither a literal commentary nor a paraphrase of it. As should be expected, the *Metaphysics* is extensively quoted in the *Ilāhīyāt* and B is one of the quoted books.⁸

Both book B itself and the philosophical tradition leading to, and deriving from, it are, on the one hand, receiving an increasing scholarly interest.⁹ The reception of this book by Avicenna, on the other hand, has not yet been investigated. The distinctive traits of Avicenna's approach to book B in the *Ilāhīyāt* are three. First, Avicenna does not quote all the *aporiai* that Aristotle takes into account in B, nor

⁶ Despite its defects, the only available "critical" edition of the *Ilāhīyāt* is Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (1960a). Unless otherwise noted, all the quotations from Avicenna in the present contribution are taken from the *Ilāhīyāt*, according to pages and lines of this edition. I have checked the text of the *Ilāhīyāt* as printed in the Cairo edition (= c) against ms. Oxford, Pococke 110 (= P110), ms. Oxford, Pococke 117 (= P117), ms. Oxford, Pococke 125 (= P125), ms. Leiden, Or. 4 (= L) and the Tehran lithograph (= T). P110, P117, P125 and L are not taken into account in c, whereas T is often mistakenly reported in the apparatus (I wish to thank J. L. Janssens for having kindly put at my disposal a photostatic reproduction of T). An important witness to the Arabic text is the Latin Medieval translation (= lat), recently edited in the Avicenna Latinus series; Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (1977–1983). Among the integral translations in modern European languages, only Max Horten's German translation (Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (1960b)) is directly based on manuscripts (one of which is L). George C. Anawati's French translation (Avicenne, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (1978–1985)) relies on c, of which the translator provides a very provisional list of corrections (vol. I, 22–24). In Olga Lizzini's Italian translation (Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (2002)) c is compared with the un-critical text of the *Ilāhīyāt* provided by Ḥasanzādah al-Āmulī in Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Ilāhīyāt* (1997/8).

⁷ *al-ʿilm al-mansūb ilā mā bāda ʿl-tabʿa* (Avicenna, *aš-Šifā': al-Manṭiq, al-Madḥal* (1952), 11.11).

⁸ On the reception of books A (*Alpha Meizon*) and Γ (*Gamma*), see Amos Bertolacci (1999) and (forthcoming).

⁹ This is witnessed by its English translation with introduction and commentary by Arthur Madigan (Aristotle (1999)), and the comprehensive study on *aporia* in Aristotle and his Greek predecessors in The Center of Aristotelian Studies at the University of Liège (2001), and also the French translation of Averroes' commentary on B by Laurence Bauloye in Averroes, *Grand Commentaire (Tafsir) de la Métaphysique. Livre B* (2002).

does he quote them in a single unit of the *Ilāhīyāt*. In other words, in the *Ilāhīyāt* there is no book of *aporiai* analogous to B. Second, Avicenna never presents the *aporiai* he quotes as unsettled problems; rather, either he provides what he regards as the true doctrine concerning the issues dealt with, or he portrays the *aporiai* neutrally as useful devices to elucidate further distinctions. In other words, Avicenna “de-problematizes” the *aporiai* to which he refers. Third, Avicenna’s own position with regard to the *aporiai* reflects what contemporary Aristotelian scholars take as Aristotle’s solution (or lack thereof) of the *aporiai* in the books of the *Metaphysics* that follow B. Thus, Avicenna adopts Aristotle’s solution to the *aporiai* he quotes, whenever Aristotle himself provides one in the remainder of the *Metaphysics*, or supplies a solution along Aristotelian lines, whenever Aristotle does not take a clear stand about the *aporia*. In other words, Avicenna’s reception of the *aporiai* of B represents a relevant case of Aristotelian exegesis.

I divide my exposition into four sections. In the first (I), I provide a brief overview of *Metaphysics* B. In the second section (II), I take into account the quotations of B that can be found in the *Ilāhīyāt* and focus on one of them as an example of Avicenna’s quotation technique. In the third section (III), I summarize the results of the previous section and show that Avicenna’s attitude towards B fits the guidelines he posits in the Prologue to *Kūtāb aš-Šifā’*. In the fourth section (IV), finally, I point at a possible historical antecedent of Avicenna’s particular way of quoting B.

Insofar as they are a first scrutiny of the subject, the following pages aim primarily at enlightening Avicenna’s *modus operandi* in his reception of book B. In other words, my main purpose is to show what Avicenna quotes of this book and how he quotes it. Doctrinal points will be taken into account only insofar as they cast light on the main object of the analysis, which is Avicenna’s quotation technique.

I. A Brief Overview of *Metaphysics* B

Book B of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, the third book of this work according to the Greek numeration, is a collection of theoretical unsolved problems or *aporiai*. The *aporiai* taken into account in B are metaphysical issues, for each of which Aristotle provides pros and cons, or thesis and antithesis, of equal weight.

B can be divided into three main parts. First, Aristotle clarifies the importance of an attentive scrutiny of *aporiai* in order to find correct solutions to them (B 1, 995a24–b4). Then, he briefly describes the *aporiai* he is dealing with (B 1, 995b4–996a17). Finally, he thoroughly discusses each of the *aporiai* previously described (B 2–6). There is not a precise congruence between the exposition and the discussion of the *aporiai*, both in terms of content (the *aporia* discussed at B 6, 1002b12–32 is not mentioned before) and in terms of order (the *aporia* discussed at B 2, 997a25–34 is expounded before the *aporia* discussed at B 2, 997a34–998a19). Modern scholars substantially agree in identifying in B the discussion of fifteen *aporiai*. Medieval Latin commentators had sometimes a different view of their number by taking as independent *aporiai* some issues that modern commentators regard as articulations of one and the same *aporia*.¹⁰ As to their content, the *aporiai* of B can be divided into two basic groups: the first four, on the one hand, concern metaphysics as a science and arise from the supposed universal scope of this discipline; the remaining eleven *aporiai*, on the other hand, address specific difficulties concerning the things that metaphysics investigates, with particular regard to the principles.

In B itself Aristotle does not aim at solving the *aporiai* and he never settles the conflict between thesis and antithesis. In this respect it is right to say that “B is, on the whole, more critical than conclusive, probing difficulties but not settling them definitively.”¹¹ Sections of the following books of the *Metaphysics*, however, can be regarded as the solutions of some of the *aporiai*.¹² Some of the *aporiai* of B are also explicitly recalled in these contexts.¹³

¹⁰ Both Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, for instance, regard B as dealing with a higher number of *aporiai*. According to Albertus Magnus, Aristotle describes twenty-seven *aporiai* in the second part of B; see Albertus Magnus, *Metaphysica, libri quinque priores* (1960), 107–109. From what can be inferred from Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on the *Metaphysics*, the *aporiai* described by Aristotle are twenty-two; see Thomas Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum expositio* (1977), 98–103.

¹¹ See Madigan’s introduction to Aristotle (1999), xxii.

¹² In the rest of the *Metaphysics* also many *aporiai* not discussed in B are taken into account. See, for example, H 5, 1044b29, 1044b34; A 2, 1069b26–27; A 4, 1070a33; A 6, 1071b22; A 9, 1074b15–17, 1075a5.

¹³ See, for instance, Γ 2, 1004a31–34.

II. *The Quotations of Metaphysics B in the Ilāhīyāt*

In the *Ilāhīyāt* Avicenna quotes four times *Metaphysics B*, with regard to five of the fifteen *aporiai* discussed by Aristotle in this book. A list of Avicenna's quotations and of the corresponding passages in B is provided in the following table.

Avicenna, <i>Ilāhīyāt</i> , quotations of B	Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics B</i>
(1) I.8, 54.3–5	B 2, 997a2–11 (<i>aporia</i> 2)
(2) VI.4, 281.1–4	B 3, 998a20–23, 998b9–11 (<i>aporia</i> 6) B 3, 998b19–21, 999a4–5 (<i>aporia</i> 7)
(3) VI.5, 298.19–299.10	B 2, 996a18–b26 (<i>aporia</i> 1)
(4) VIII.4, 344.16–345.5	B 4, 1001a9–19 (<i>aporia</i> 11)

Table 1

Avicenna quotes passages, in the order, from *aporia* 2; *aporia* 6 and *aporia* 7 (jointly); *aporia* 1; *aporia* 11.¹⁴ All the quotations are taken from the discussion of the *aporiai* in the third part of B. Two among the quoted *aporiai* (1 and 2) belong to the first group of four *aporiai*, concerning the scientific status of metaphysics. The other three *aporiai* (6, 7 and 11) belong to the second group of eleven *aporiai* dealing with the things that metaphysics investigates. Within this second group, *aporiai* 6, 7 and 11 deal with the concepts of “being” and “one.” All this suggests that Avicenna is particularly interested, on the one hand, in issues regarding metaphysics as a science, and, on the other hand, in the doctrine of the primary concepts.

As to their style, Avicenna's quotations of the *aporiai* of B are implicit or anonymous, just as for all the other books of the *Metaphysics* with the exception of α (*Alpha Elatton*) and Λ (*Lambda*).¹⁵ They are not literal and can be subsumed under the rubric of “paraphrase.” Their extent and degree of faithfulness to the original are variable.

¹⁴ Avicenna might refer also to *aporia* 3 (B 3, 997a25–34) in VI.5, 300.4–6; but if he does, the reference is quite vague and cannot be regarded as a quotation.

¹⁵ The significance of the explicit quotations of books α and Λ is discussed in A. Bertolacci (2001).

The quotations occur in different places of the *Ilāhīyāt* and are spread throughout it (with a significant concentration in treatise VI).¹⁶ This happens because Avicenna quotes the *aporiai* in contexts suiting the issues debated in the *aporiai*.

A detailed study of all the quotations of B lies outside the scope of this article. In the present section, I summarize the content of the first three quotations and analyze more closely the last one. I chose the last quotation over the previous three because it is short and relatively straightforward. Its analysis is accomplished by means of a synoptic table. In it, the text of Avicenna (on the left) is compared with Aristotle's original text (in the center) and with Uṣṭāṭ's translation of B (on the right).

(1) In I.8, 54.3–5, Avicenna focuses on one of the issues of *aporia* 2 (thesis: the science of the axioms and the science of substance are the same science; antithesis: they are not the same science). He finds Aristotle holding the thesis (the metaphysician investigates both substance and axioms) in Γ 3, 1005a19–b8, and hence regards the thesis as the true alternative. After quoting the passage from Γ asserting the thesis (I.8, 53.16–54.2), he introduces an objection to it (metaphysics cannot be the science of both the axioms and substance, 54.3–5) that is a reworking of an argument for the antithesis of *aporia* 2 (there cannot be any science of the axioms, B 2, 997a2–11). He then provides an answer to the objection along original lines (54.6–17). Avicenna recasts the text of B that he is quoting according to his own technical terminology, introducing into it the gnoseological categories of “concept formation” (*taṣawwūr*) and “granting assent” (*taṣḍīq*).

(2) In VI.4, 281.1–4, Avicenna quotes *aporia* 6 (thesis: the genera are elements and principles of things; antithesis: the first intrinsic constituents are elements and principles of things) and *aporia* 7 (thesis: the first, most universal, genera are principles of things; antithesis: the last, least universal, genera are principles of things) jointly. He is primarily concerned with *aporia* 7 and uses *aporia* 6 to fit *aporia* 7 in the overall context, which is the paraphrase of Aristotle's doctrine of “element” in *Metaphysics* Δ 3. Within this context, Avicenna takes from Δ 3 an opinion about genera as elements (281.1–2) to which

¹⁶ Since treatise VI deals with causality, this may be regarded as a sign of the importance of the doctrine of causality in Avicenna's *Ilāhīyāt*. On Avicenna's doctrine of causality in the *Ilāhīyāt*, see A. Bertolacci (2002a) and R. Wisnovsky (2002).

he adds: (i) the third argument for the thesis of *aporia* 6 (some of those who regard “one” and “being” as elements take them as genera, B 3, 998b9–11 = 281.2) and (ii) the only argument for the thesis of *aporia* 7 (“one” and “being” are principles since they are the most general things, B 3, 998b19–21 = 281.2). He subsequently criticizes point (ii) (281.3–4). The criticism of (ii) is based on the ontology of the *Categories*, but encompasses also part of the fourth objection against the thesis of *aporia* 7 (what is predicated directly of the individuals has more unity than what is not, B 3, 999a4–5 = 281.4). Avicenna, hence, regards the thesis of *aporia* 7 as false. He also possibly regards the thesis of *aporia* 6 as false, in so far as he links it with the thesis of *aporia* 7.

(3) In VI.5, 298.19–299.10 at the end of his treatment of the four causes in *Ilāhīyāt* VI, Avicenna takes into account the main issue of *aporia* 1 (thesis: the study of all types of causes belongs to metaphysics; antithesis: the study of only one type of causes belongs to metaphysics). Avicenna regards the thesis as the right alternative (299.3). He first quotes the second objection against the thesis (in many objects, as in motionless things and mathematical, not all causes are present, B 2, 996a21–996b1 = 298.19–299.3). Along original lines, he portrays it as insufficient to invalidate the claims of metaphysics to investigate the four causes (299.6–10). He subsequently shows that this objection is false (299.10–300.7) by relying on Aristotle’s doctrine in book M. Avicenna also quotes the first objection against the thesis (causes are not contraries, B 2, 996a20–21), which he regards as true, but not strong enough to invalidate the thesis (299.4–5). Conclusively, Avicenna quotes the objection that Aristotle moves against the antithesis (if the studies of each of the four causes were independent sciences, then the science of the final cause, the science of the formal cause and the science of the moving cause could be regarded, each, as metaphysics, B 2, 996b1–26). He quotes this objection selectively, focusing on the final cause (300.7–8), in order to stress the importance of the investigation of the final cause within metaphysics (300.8–9).

(4) In *Ilāhīyāt*, VIII.4, 344.12–345.5, Avicenna refers to *aporia* 11 (B 4, 1001a4–b25), of which he quotes part (1001a9–19).

In chapter VIII.4 Avicenna describes the features of the Necessary Existent, namely, of God, whom in chapters VIII.1–3 he has shown to be the First Principle.

Let us observe Avicenna’s quotation more in detail in Table 2.

<i>Ilāhīyāt</i> , VIII.4, 344.12–345.5	Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i> B 4, 1001a9–19	Uṣṭāṭ's Arabic translation of the <i>Metaphysics</i>
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[1] (344.12–13) We rather say, [starting again] from the beginning, that the “necessary existent” can be understood as the necessary existent itself,¹⁷

[2] (344.13) as the “one” can be understood as the one itself,¹⁸ cp. 1001a9–12

[3] (344.13–14) or about it [i.e. about the “necessary existent”] it can be understood that its quiddity is, for instance, [the quiddity of] a man or [of] another substance, and that the man in question is what the necessary existent is,¹⁹

[4] (344.15) as about the “one” it can be understood that it is water, or air, or a man that are one.²⁰ cp. 1001a12–17

[5] (344.16–18) You can consider and know this [distinction] from the difference [of opinions] regarding whether the principle in natural things is one or many. For some regard this principle as one [**Monists**], others as many [**Pluralists**].²¹ 1001a12–19: **Antithesis. Monists** (see below) and **Pluralists** (“A similar view is expressed by those who make the elements more than one; for these also must say that being and unity are precisely all the things which they say are principles”)

¹⁷ *bal naqūlu min ra'sin inna wāğība l-wuğūdi qad yu'qalu nafsa wāğibi l-wuğūdi.*

¹⁸ *ka-l-wāhidi qad yu'qalu nafsa l-wāhidi.*

¹⁹ *wa-qad yu'qalu min dālika anna māhīyatahū hiya maṭalan insānun aw ġawharun āḥaru min al-ğawāhiri wa-dālika l-insānu huwa llađī huwa wāğibu l-wuğūdi.*

²⁰ *kamā annahū qad yu'qalu min al-wāhidi annahū mā'un aw hawā'un aw insānun wa-huwa wāhīdun.*

²¹ *wa-qad tata'ammalu fa-ta'lamu dālika mimmā waq'a fihi l-iḥtilāfu fi anna l-mabda'a fi t-ṭabī'iyāti wāhīdun aw kaṭīrun fa-ba'duhum ġā'ala l-mabda'a wāhīdan wa-ba'duhum ġā'alalahū kaṭīran.*

Table 2. (cont.)

<i>Ilāhīyāt</i> , VIII.4, 344.12–345.5	Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i> B 4, 1001a9–19	Uṣṭāṭ's Arabic translation of the <i>Metaphysics</i>
[6] (345.1–2) Among these, some of those who regard it as one [Monists1] regard the first principle not as the essence of the “one,” but as something which is one, like water, air, or fire and so on. ²²	(1001a12–17) [Antithesis: Monists] But the natural philosophers take a different line; e.g., Empedocles . . . says what unity is; for he would seem to say it is love . . . Others say this unity and being, of which things consist and have been made, is fire, and others say it is air. ²³	(261.4–8) As to the masters of natural science, as Ibn Duqlīs, . . . he claims . . . Others claim that this one and being (<i>huwīya</i>) are fire. Others claim that they are air. From them [i.e., fire and air] the beings are made and generated. ²⁴
[7] (345.3–5) Some other of these [Monists2] regard the principle as the essence of the “one” in so far as it is “one,” not as something to which the “one” occurs. They distinguish, therefore, between a quiddity to which “one” and “existent” occur, and “one” and “existent” in so far as they are “one” and “existent.” ²⁵	(1001a9–12) [Thesis: Idealists] Plato and the Pythagoreans thought being and unity were nothing else, but this was their nature, their substance just being unity and being. ²⁶	(261.2–4) As to Plato and the Pythagoreans, they did not claim that being and unity are anything else, but they claimed that this is their nature, as if their substance were to be one and being. ²⁷

Table 2

²² *wa-llaḏī ḡā'alahū minhum wāḥidan fa-minhum man ḡā'ala l-mabda'a l-awwala lā dāta l-wāḥidi bal ṣay'an huwa l-wāḥidu miḷla mā'in aw hawā'in aw nārin aw ḡayri dālika.*

²³ οἱ δὲ περὶ φύσεως, οἷον Ἐμπεδοκλῆς . . . λέγει . . . ἕτεροι δὲ πῦρ, οἱ δ' ἄερα φασὶν εἶναι τὸ ἐν τούτῳ καὶ τὸ ὄν, ἐξ οὗ τὰ ὄντα εἰναι τε καὶ γεγόνεσθαι. Greek text as in Aristotle (1924); English translation in Aristotle (1984).

²⁴ *wa-ammā aṣḥābu l-'ilmi l-ṭabī'iyi miḷla bnī duqlīsa fa-innahū . . . wa-yaz'umu . . . wā-āḥarūna za'amū anna hādā l-wāḥida wa-l-huwiyyata humā nārun wa-za'amū ḡayruhum annahū hawā'un wa-minhu takawwanat wa-tawalladat al-huwiyyātu.* On Uṣṭāṭ's use of the term *huwīya* to translate the Greek ὄν and his influence on Avicenna, see A. Bertolacci (2003).

²⁵ *wa-minhum man ḡā'ala l-mabda'a dāta l-wāḥidi min ḥaytu huwa wāḥidun lā ṣay'un [sic] 'araḏa lahū l-wāḥidu fa-faraḡa idan baḡna māḥiyatin ya'ridu lahā l-wāḥidu wa-l-mawḡūdu wa-baḡna l-wāḥidi wa-l-mawḡūdi min ḥaytu huwa wāḥidun wa-mawḡūdun.*

²⁶ Πλάτων μὲν γὰρ καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι οὐχ ἕτερόν τι τὸ ὄν οὐδὲ τὸ ἐν ἀλλὰ τοῦτο αὐτῶν τὴν φύσιν εἶναι, ὡς οὐσης τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐν εἶναι καὶ ὄντι.

²⁷ *fa-ammā aḡlātūmu wa-l-ḡitāḡūriyyūna fa-lam yaz'umū anna l-huwiyyata wa-l-wāḥida ṣay'un āḥaru bal za'amū anna hādā ṭibā'uhumā ka-anna ḡawharahumā an yakūnā wāḥidan wa-huwiyan [sic].*

Aristotle portrays *aporia* 11 as “[t]he hardest inquiry of all, and the one most necessary for knowledge of the truth” (B 4, 1001a4–5).²⁸ The issue discussed in this *aporia* is whether “one” and “being” are nothing else than one and being (thesis), or have some other underlying nature, so that they are, for instance, friendship, fire or air (antithesis) (B 4, 1001a5–8). Before discussing thesis and antithesis, Aristotle mentions their advocates. The thesis is held by Plato and the Pythagoreans (B 4, 1001a9–12), the antithesis by two groups of natural philosophers: those who posit only one element of things (1001a12–17) and those who posit more than one element (1001a17–19). In sum, we have three groups of thinkers in Aristotle. For the sake of brevity, I call the first group (namely, Plato and the Pythagoreans) “Idealists,” the second group (namely, the natural philosophers who posit only one main element of things) “Monists” and the third group (namely, the natural philosophers who posit more than one element) “Pluralists.” The Idealists hold the thesis, namely, that “one” and “being” are nothing else than one and being; the Monists and the Pluralists hold the antithesis, namely, that “one” and “being” have some other underlying nature. After having expounded thesis and antithesis, Aristotle mentions the difficulties they entail (B 4, 1001a19–b25).

In the following books of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle shows that both the thesis and the antithesis are false and that the true doctrine regarding “one” and “being” implies that they are neither independent entities (thesis) nor mere accidents (antithesis).²⁹

Avicenna quotes the doxographic part of *aporia* 11 (B 4, 1001a9–19) as a concrete example of a distinction he is making with regard to the concept of “necessary existent.” The distinction Avicenna draws is between the “necessary existent” as the necessary existent as such, on the one hand, and the “necessary existent” as an essence (or quiddity) that exists necessarily, on the other. This distinction parallels a similar one that Avicenna draws elsewhere (I.6), namely, the distinction between the Necessary Existent *per se*, i.e., God, and the necessary existent in virtue of something else, i.e., the created thing that exists necessarily due to the cause that bestows existence to its essence. Avicenna reports the opinions favoring thesis and antithesis

²⁸ He says something similar about *aporia* 8 (B 4, 999a24–25).

²⁹ See Aristotle (1999), 115–118.

as views elucidating the aforementioned distinction. The thesis (the opinion according to which “being” and “one” are nothing else than being and one) corresponds with the former alternative (the “necessary existent” is nothing else than necessary existent), whereas the antithesis (the opinion according to which “being” and “one” have an underlying subject) corresponds with the latter alternative (the “necessary existent” is an essence that exists necessarily).

Sections [1] and [3] are the two members of the distinction Avicenna is making about the “necessary existent.” Sections [2] and [4] contain a first, brief, reference to the part of the *aporia* Avicenna quotes. This part is actually quoted in sections [5]–[7]. In the actual quotation Avicenna somehow reverses the order of Aristotle’s text. He quotes first lines 1001a12–19 in section [5], then lines 1001a12–17 in section [6], finally lines 1001a9–12 in section [7].

From sections [2] and [4] it is immediately clear that in quoting the *aporia* Avicenna focuses on “one” more than on “being.” “Being” (= “existent”) is mentioned only at the very end of the quotation in section [7]. This insistence on the “one” is meant to avoid any confusion between the “necessary existent,” Avicenna’s topic, and “existent” (= “being”), one of the two concepts with which Aristotle is dealing.

Section [5] takes from lines 1001a12–19 the idea of a disagreement between Monists and Pluralists about the number of principles (whether they are one or many). In the following sections Avicenna pays no attention to the Pluralists’ opinion and focuses instead on the Monists’. He splits the Monists into two groups, which I call respectively Monists1 and Monists2: Monists1 correspond with Aristotle’s Monists and hold the antithesis (section [6]); Monists2 correspond with Aristotle’s Idealists and hold the thesis (section [7]). Avicenna’s interpretation of Aristotle’s Idealists, namely, of Plato and the Pythagoreans, as advocates of monism is, of course, questionable. Avicenna, however, does not report the names of Aristotle’s Monists (Empedocles) and of Aristotle’s Idealists (Plato and the Pythagoreans) in section [6]–[7]. Remarkably, in section [7] Avicenna uses the verb *arada* (“to occur” in the sense of “to happen accidentally”) to describe the link between “one” and “existent” and the essence which is one and existent according to Monists2.

As to Avicenna’s position regarding the issue, it can only be guessed, since he neither supports nor criticizes thesis and antithesis. Insofar as thesis and antithesis are quoted to exemplify a distinction that

Avicenna regards as true in both its members (God is the Necessary Existent *per se*, created things are essences that exist necessarily), it could be assumed that he takes both thesis and antithesis as true. Still, this inference is largely a matter of speculation that only a deeper investigation into Avicenna's doctrine of unity and being could corroborate or invalidate. What is sure, though, is that in Avicenna's mind the different views of Monists¹ and Monists² are not relevant in themselves, but are only relevant as a way to clarify an important distinction regarding the concept of "necessary existent." About this latter point, his position is extremely clear.

To summarize, of *aporia* 11 (thesis: "one" and "being" are nothing else than one and being; antithesis: "one" and "being" have some other underlying nature and are, for instance, friendship, fire or air), Avicenna quotes the opinions supporting thesis and antithesis (B 4, 1001a9–19). In Aristotle's text these opinions are held respectively by Plato and the Pythagoreans (Idealists, thesis) and by Monists and Pluralists (antithesis). Avicenna derives from the *aporia* the idea of a contrast between Monists and Pluralists about the number of principles (344.16–18) and portrays two different groups of Monists as supporters of antithesis and thesis. The first group of Monists (= Monists in Aristotle, B 4, 1001a12–17) holds the antithesis (345.1–2), the second group (= Idealists in Aristotle, B 4, 1001a9–12) holds the thesis (345.3–5). In quoting these opinions, however, Avicenna's aim is not doxographical, but theoretical. He uses thesis and antithesis to exemplify a distinction concerning the concept of "necessary existent" (first alternative, the "necessary existent" is nothing else than necessary existent; second alternative, the "necessary existent" is an essence that exists necessarily, 344.12–15), which he subsequently employs in his doctrine of God as Necessary Existent.

III. *The Main Features of Avicenna's Reception of Metaphysics B*

On the basis of the analysis provided in section II, the main trends of Avicenna's reception of B can be summarized as follows.

- (1) Avicenna is selective. He focuses on the crucial portion of B, the third, where *aporai* are discussed and chooses five among them.
- (2) He is concise. No *aporia* is quoted in full; rather, all are summarized. *Aporiai* sharing related issues, like *aporiai* 6 and 7, are quoted together.

- (3) He is assertive. He never presents the *aporiai* as problems. In most cases, he embraces either the thesis (*aporiai* 1 and 2) or the antithesis (*aporiai* 6 and 7). The rejected alternatives are quoted as untenable objections to previously established doctrines (*aporia* 2), or as wrong opinions to be dismissed (*aporiai* 6 and 7), or as insufficient reasons to invalidate a certain position (*aporia* 1). In so doing, he solves the *aporiai*. If (as in *aporia* 11) he does not prefer the thesis over the antithesis, or vice versa, the unresolved conflict between them clarifies a distinction about which he takes a clear stand.
- (4) He quotes the *aporiai* not in a single portion of the *Ilāhīyāt*, but in different places of the work.

Points (3) and (4) deserve particular attention. As to point (3), Avicenna's assertive reformulation of the *aporiai* is a reflex of his overall conception of metaphysics as a discipline and of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as the canonical text on this topic. In Avicenna's view—which he inherits from a long tradition starting at least with Alexander of Aphrodisias—metaphysics is a science in the strict sense of the term, i.e., a demonstrative discipline. This implies that in Avicenna's reworking of the *Metaphysics* many of the non-demonstrative procedures employed by Aristotle, especially the dialectical ones, are, as much as possible, effaced and replaced by more rigorous methods. Now, the aporetic method displayed by Aristotle in B can be rightly regarded as an instance of dialectic, insofar as the *aporiai* of B result from a “dialogical” contrast between thesis and antithesis and are based in most cases on ἔνδοξα, i.e., on those reputable opinions that are the starting-point of dialectic.³⁰ Avicenna's effort to replace dialectic with demonstration in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is the main reason why the *aporiai* of B are not presented by him in the *Ilāhīyāt* as problems.

As to point (4), the displacement of the *aporiai* of B is part of an overall recasting of the structure of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the *Ilāhīyāt*, inspired by the epistemology of the *Posterior Analytics*, that I have documented elsewhere.³¹

Points (3) and (4) are interconnected. Avicenna quotes the *aporiai* in different places of the *Ilāhīyāt* (point 4) just because the doctrines

³⁰ See B 1, 995a24–26: “It is necessary . . . for us first to go through the issues about which one must first raise aporiae. These are *issues about which people have held different views*, as well as anything else that has been overlooked,” (English translation as in Aristotle (1999), 1 (emphasis added)). For other instances of the connection between *aporiai* and *endoxa*, see Aristotle, *De anima*, A 2, 403b20–25 and *Nicomachean Ethics*, H 1, 1145b2–7.

³¹ A. Bertolacci (2002b).

dealt with in those places represent the solutions of the *aporiai* (point 3), or, in any case, help to clarify them.

The aforementioned four features of Avicenna's reception of B reflect and, at the same time, throw light on the outline of the *Šifā'* that Avicenna provides in the Prologue to this work. Avicenna says there:

- (1) "Our purpose in this book . . . is to set down in it the gist of . . . the Fundamental Principles contained in the philosophical science attributed to the ancients"; and he adds: "There is nothing of account to be found in the books of the ancients which we did not include in this book of ours."³² Thus, with regard to the previous philosophical tradition, Avicenna restricts the scope of his work to the "gist of the fundamental principles" and to what is "of account."
- (2) Avicenna portrays the *Šifā'* as "a straightforward compendium upon which most opinions will agree and which will help remove the veils of fanciful notions"; and later he says: "I strived in earnest to be concise and always to avoid repetition."³³
- (3) He also says: "I sought to set down in it most of the discipline, indicate in every passage where ambiguity may occur and solve it by setting forth clearly the correct answer to the extent of my ability."³⁴
- (4) Finally he says: ". . . if it [i.e., the amount of valuable things found in the books of the ancients and included in the present book] is not found in the place where it is customary to record it, then it will be found in another place which I thought more appropriate for it."³⁵

In other words, in the Prologue to the *Šifā'* Avicenna declares his intention to write a book that would be (1) selective, (2) concise, (3) unambiguous and (4) original in structure. His quotations of B can be regarded as a concrete application of the four points of this program.

In this regard, insofar as it instantiates the basic features of the *Šifā'* as outlined in its Prologue, Avicenna's treatment of B is a prime example of his attitude towards Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in his philosophical *opus maius*.

³² Avicenna, *Aš-Šifā': al-Mantiq, al-Madhal* (1952), 9.7–9; 9.17–10, 1; English translation as in Gutas (1988), 50–51.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.10–11; 9.15–16. M. E. Marmura, in his review of Gutas' monograph on Avicenna (Marmura (1991)) regards the expression "straightforward compendium" as an improper rendition of the Arabic, but this concerns the adjective "straightforward" more than the substantive "compendium."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.12–13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.1–2.

IV. *Nicholas of Damascus as a Possible Source of Avicenna*

One of the extant Greek commentaries on the *Metaphysics* whose Arabic translation is attested, though not preserved, is Syrianus' commentary on B.³⁶ If it ever existed, however, the Arabic translation of Syrianus' commentary on B seems to have had a very limited circulation and impact.³⁷

More interesting is the case of another Greek commentator of Aristotle, Nicholas of Damascus (Nicolaus Damascenus), who lived between 64 B.C. and about 14 A.D., and wrote a compendium of Aristotle's philosophy, which is lost in Greek but extant in a Syriac abridged version and in some Arabic fragments.³⁸

As we have just seen, two of the main features of Avicenna's attitude towards B are the fact of providing solutions to the *aporiai*, and the fact of dealing with the *aporiai* in scattered places of the *Ilāhīyāt* (see points 3 and 4 in section III). Now, in a passage of his *Tafsīr* of the *Metaphysics*, Averroes ascribes these same features to the aforementioned work by Nicholas of Damascus. Here is what Averroes says in his introductory remarks on B:

But in the natural science, he [i.e., Aristotle] thought that the best [way] to impart knowledge was to put the dialectical investigation before each problem when he wanted to establish the demonstration about that single problem.

As to this book [i.e., the *Metaphysics*], he deemed appropriate [i] to put beforehand the dialectical discussions concerning all the difficult problems of this discipline and to treat them separately on their own [in book B]. Then [ii] he provided the demonstrations proper to each problem in the appropriate place of the treatises of this science. . . .

Nīqulāwš disagreed with the arrangement of the Wise [i.e., Aristotle] in these two respects [(i)-(ii)], and did what he [i.e., Aristotle] had done in the natural science.³⁹

From this passage we can infer that Nicholas in his compendium of the *Metaphysics* dealt with the *aporiai* of B ("the dialectical investigation")

³⁶ See Ibn an-Nadīm, *Kūtab al-Fihrist* (1871–1872), 1:251.31.

³⁷ In his summary of the *Metaphysics*, *Fī aḡrād al-hakīm fī kulli maqāla min al-Kūtab al-mawsūm bi-l-hurūf*, (in al-Fārābī (1890), 34.14–15), al-Fārābī mentions only the commentaries by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius on Lambda among the available commentaries on the *Metaphysics*. Averroes does the same in his *Tafsīr* of the *Metaphysics* (Averroes, *Tafsīr* (1938–1948), 3:1393.4–7).

³⁸ Nicolaus Damascenus (1965), 11–12, 32–33.

³⁹ Averroes, *Tafsīr* (1938–1948), 1:167.4–10; 168.5–6.

in different places of the work (“before each problem”) and connected the *aporiai* with their solution (“the demonstration about that single problem”). Therefore, Nicholas shares with Avicenna features (4) and (3) of the treatment of B. Since Nicholas’ work is a compendium, it is obvious that he also shares feature (2), namely, conciseness. Unfortunately, the extant version of Nicholas’ work does not allow us to explore feature (1), i.e., to examine what selection of *aporiai* (if any) he used.

The similarities between Nicholas and Avicenna are not restricted to B. They concern also book Δ (Delta) of the *Metaphysics*. Averroes informs us that Nicholas dealt with the philosophical terms discussed in Δ in different parts of his work in connection with the doctrines to which the single terms are related.⁴⁰ This also is exactly Avicenna’s way of quoting Δ .

As Averroes witnesses, Nicholas’ work was known in the Arab philosophical milieu. The resemblances between Nicholas’ reworking of B and Δ and Avicenna’s quotations of these books are striking. Whether Nicholas directly influenced Avicenna, or the similarities between them are due to their adoption of the same literary genre, namely, the compendium, remains to be ascertained.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2:476.3–7.

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